PENROD

(Continued.)

Miss Spence—in the flesh—had directed toward the physical body of the absent Penrod an inquiry as to the fractional consequences of dividing seventeen apples fairly among three boys, and she was surprised and displeased to receive no answer, although to the best of her knowledge and belief he was looking fixedly at her. She repeated her question crisply without visible effect; then summoned him by name with increasing asperity. Twice she called him, while all his fellow pupils turned to stare at the gazing boy. She advanced a step from the platform.

"Penrod Schofield!"

"Oh, my goodness!" he shouted suddenly. "Can't you keep still a minute?"

CHAPTER VI.
Uncle John.

MISS SPENCE gasped. So did the pupils. The whole room filled with a swelling, conglomerate "O-o-o-o-h!"

As for Penrod himself, the walls reeled with the shock. He sat with his mouth open, a mere lump of stupefaction. For the appalling words that he had hurled at the teacher were as inexplicable to him as to any other who heard them.

Nothing is more treacherous than the human mind; nothing else so loves to play the Iscariot. Even when patiently bullied into a semblance of order and training it may prove but a base and shifty servant. And Penrod's mind was not his servant. It was a master, with the April wind's whims, and it had just played him a diabolical trick. The very jolt with which he came back to the schoolroom in the midst of his fancied flight jarred his day dream utterly out of him and he sat open mouthed in horror at what he had said.

The unanimous gasp of awe was protracted. Miss Spence, however, finally recovered her breath, and, returning deliberately to the platform, faced the school. "And then, for a little while," as pathetic stories sometimes recount, "everything was very still." It was so still, in fact, that Penrod's newborn notoriety could almost be heard growing. This grisly silence was at last broken by the teacher.

"Penrod Schofield, stand up!"

The miserable child obeyed.

"What did you mean by speaking to me in that way?"

He hung his head, raked the floor with the side of his shoe, swayed, swallowed, looked suddenly at his hands with the air of never having seen them before, then clasped them behind him. The school shivered in ecstatic horror, every fascinated eye upon him, yet there was not a soul in the room but was profoundly grateful to him for the sensation—including the offended teacher herself. Unhappily, all this gratitude was unconscious and altogether different from the kind which results in testimonials and loving cups. On the contrary!

"Penrod Schofield!"

He gulped.

"Answer me at once! Why did you speak to me like that?"

"I—was"— He choked, unable to continue.

"Speak out!"

"I was just—thinking," he managed to stammer.

"That will not do," she returned sharply. "I wish to know immediately why you spoke as you did."

The stricken Penrod answered helplessly:

"Because I was just thinking."

Upon the very rack he could have offered no simpler truthful explanation. It was all he knew about it.

"Thinking what?"

"Just thinking."

Miss Spence's expression gave evidence that her power of self restraint was undergoing a remarkable test. However, after taking counsel with herself, she commanded:

"Come here!"

He shuffled forward, and she placed a chair upon the platform near her own.

"Sit there!"

Then (but not at all as if nothing had happened) she continued the lesson in arithmetic. Spiritually the children may have learned a lesson in very small fractions, indeed, as they gazed at the fragment of sin before them on the stool of penitence. They all stared at him attentively, with hard and passionately interested eyes in which there was never one trace of pity. It cannot be said with precision that he writhed. His movement was more a slow, continuous squirm, effected with a ghastly assumption of languid indifference; while his gaze, in the effort to escape the marble hearted glare of his schoolmates, affixed itself with apparent permanence to the waistcoat button of James Russell Lowell just above the "u" in "Russell."

Classes came and classes went, grilling him with eyes. Newcomers received the story of the crime in darkling whispers, and the outcast sat and squirmed and squirmed and squirmed. (He did one or two things with his spine which a professional contortionist would have observed with real interest.) And all this while of freezing suspense was but the criminal's detention awaiting trial. A known punishment may be anticipated with some measure of equanimity—at least, the prisoner may prepare himself to undergo it—but the unknown looms more monstrous for every attempt to guess it. Penrod's crime was unique. There were no rules to aid him in estimating the vengeance to fall upon him for it. What seemed most probable was that he would be expelled from the school in the presence of his family, the mayor and council and whipped afterward by his father upon the state house steps, with the entire city as audience by invitation of the authorities.

Noon came. The rows of children filed out, every head turning for a last unpleasingly speculative look at the outlaw. Then Miss Spence closed the door into the cloakroom and that into the big hall and came and sat at her desk, near Penrod. The tramping of feet outside, the shrill calls and shouting and the changing voices of the older boys ceased to be heard—and there was silence. Penrod, still affecting to be occupied with Lowell, was conscious that Miss Spence looked at him intently.

"Penrod," she said gravely, "what excuse have you to offer before I report your case to the principal?"

The word "principal" struck him to the vitals. Grand inquisitor, grand khan, sultan, emperor, czar, Caesar Augustus—these are comparable. He stopped squirming instantly and sat rigid.

"I want an answer. Why did you shout those words at me?"

"Well," he murmured, "I was just—thinking."

"Thinking what?" she asked sharply.

"I don't know."

"That won't do!"

He took his left ankle in his right hand and regarded it helplessly.

"That won't do, Penrod Schofield," she repeated severely. "If that is all the excuse you have to offer I shall report your case this instant!"

And she rose with fatal intent.

But Penrod was one of those whom the precipice inspires. "Well, I have got an excuse."

"Well"—she paused impatiently—"what is it?"

He had not an idea, but he felt one coming and replied automatically in a plaintive tone:

"I guess anybody that had been through what I had to go through last night would think they had an excuse."

Miss Spence resumed her seat, though with the air of being ready to leap from it instantly.

"What has last night to do with your insolence to me this morning?"

"Well, I guess you'd see," he returned, emphasizing the plaintive note, "if you knew what I know."

"Now, Penrod," she said, in a kinder voice, "I have a high regard for your mother and father, and it would hurt me to distress them, but you must either tell me what was the matter with you or I'll have to take you to Mrs. Houston."

"Well, ain't I going to?" he cried, spurred by the dread name. "It's because I didn't sleep last night."

"Were you ill?" The question was put with some dryness.

He felt the dryness. "No'm; I wasn't."

"Then if some one in your family was so ill that even you were kept up all night, how does it happen they let you come to school this morning?"

"It wasn't illness," he returned, shaking his head mournfully. "It was lots worse'n anybody's being sick. It was—it was—well, it was jest awful."

"What was?" He marked with anxiety the incredulity in her tone.

"It was about Aunt Clara," he said.

"Your Aunt Clara!" she repeated. "Do you mean your mother's sister, who married Mr. Farry of Dayton, Ill.?"

"Yes—Uncle John," returned Penrod sorrowfully. "The trouble was about him."

Miss Spence frowned a frown which he rightly interpreted as one of continued suspicion. "She and I were in school together," she said. "I used to know her very well, and I've always heard her married life was entirely happy. I don't"—

"Yes, it was," he interrupted, "until last year when Uncle John took to running with traveling men"—

"What?"

"Yes'm." He nodded solemnly. "That was what started it. At first he was a good, kind husband, but these traveling men would coax him into a saloon on his way from work, and they got him to drinking beer and then ales, wines, liquors, and cigars"—

"Penrod!"

"Ma'am?"

"I'm not inquiring into your Aunt Clara's private affairs. I'm asking you if you have anything to say which would palliate"—

"That's what I'm tryin' to tell you about, Miss Spence," he pleaded, "if you'd jest only let me. When Aunt Clara and her little baby daughter got to our house last night"—

"You say Mrs. Farry is visiting your mother?"

"Yes'm—not just visiting—you see, she had to come. Well, of course, little baby Clara, she was so bruised up and mauled, where he'd been hittin' her with his cane"—

"You mean that your uncle had done such a thing as that!" exclaimed Miss Spence, suddenly disarmed by this scandal.

"Yes'm. And mamma and Margaret had to sit up all night nursin' little Clara. And Aunt Clara was in such a state somebody had to keep talkin' to her, and there wasn't anybody but me to do it. So I"—

"But where was your father?" she cried.

"Ma'am?"

"Where was your father while"—

"Oh, papa?" Penrod paused, reflected, then brightened. "Why, he was down at the train waitin' to see if Uncle John would try to follow 'em and make 'em come home so's he could persecute 'em some more. I wanted to do that, but they said if he did come I mightn't be strong enough to hold him—and"— The brave lad paused again modestly. Miss Spence's expression was encouraging. Her eyes were wide with astonishment, and there may have been in them also the mingled beginnings of admiration and self reproach. Penrod, warming to his work, felt safer every moment.

"And so," he continued, "I had to sit up with Aunt Clara. She had some pretty big bruises, too, and I had to"—

"But why didn't they send for a doctor?" However, this question was only a flicker of dying incredulity.

"Oh, they didn't want any doctor!" exclaimed the inspired realist promptly. "They don't want anybody to hear about it, because Uncle John might reform—and then where'd he be if everybody knew he'd been a drunkard and whipped his wife and baby daughter?"

"Oh!" said Miss Spence.

"You see, he used to be upright as anybody," he went on explanatively. "It all begun"—

"Began, Penrod."

"Yes'm. It all commenced from the first day he let those traveling men coax him into the saloon." Penrod narrated the downfall of his Uncle John at length. In detail he was nothing short of plethoric, and incident followed incident, sketched with such vividness, such abundance of color and such verisimilitude to a drunkard's life as a drunkard's life should be, that had Miss Spence possessed the rather chilling attributes of William J. Burns himself the last trace of skepticism must have vanished from her mind. Besides, there are two things that will be believed of any man whatsoever, and one of them is that he has taken to drink. And in every sense it was a moving picture which, with simple but eloquent words, the virtuous Penrod set before his teacher.

His eloquence increased with what it fed on, and as with the eloquence so with self reproach in the gentle bosom of the teacher. She cleared her throat with difficulty once or twice during his description of his ministering night with Aunt Clara. "And I said to her, 'Why, Aunt Clara, what's the use of takin' on so about it?' And I said, 'Now, Aunt Clara, all the crying in the world can't make things any better.' And then she'd just keep catchin' hold of me and sob and kind of holler, and I'd say: 'Don't cry, Aunt Clara. Please don't cry!'"

Then, under the influence of some fragmentary survivals of the respectable portion of his Sunday adventures, his theme became more exalted, and, only partially misquoting a phrase from a psalm, he related how he had made it of comfort to Aunt Clara and how he had besought her to seek higher guidance in her trouble.

The surprising thing about a structure such as Penrod was erecting is that the taller it becomes the more ornamentation it will stand. Gifted boys have this faculty of building magnificence upon cobwebs—and Penrod was gifted. Under the spell of his really great performance, Miss Spence gazed more and more sweetly upon the prodigy of spiritual beauty and goodness before her, until at last, when Penrod came to the explanation of his "just thinking," she was forced to turn her head away.

"You mean, dear," she said gently, "that you were all worn out and hardly knew what you were saying?"

"Yes'm."

"And you were thinking about all those dreadful things so hard that you forgot where you were?"

"I was thinking," he said simply, "how to save Uncle John."

And the end of it for this mighty boy was that the teacher kissed him!

CHAPTER VII.
Fidelity of a Little Dog.

THE returning students that afternoon observed that Penrod's desk was vacant, and nothing could have been more impressive than that sinister mere emptiness. The accepted theory was that Penrod had been arrested. How breath taking then the sensation when at the beginning of the second hour he strolled in with inimitable carelessness and, rubbing his eyes, somewhat noticeably in the manner of one who has snatched an hour of much needed sleep, took his place as if nothing in particular had happened. This at first supposed to be a superhuman exhibition of sheer audacity, became but the more dumfounding when Miss Spence, looking from her desk, greeted him with a pleasant little nod. Even after school Penrod gave numerous maddened investigators no relief. All he would consent to say was:

"Oh, I just talked to her."

A mystification not entirely unconnected with the one thus produced was manifested at his own family dinner table the following evening. Aunt Clara had been out rather late and came to the table after the rest were seated. She wore a puzzled expression.

"Do you ever see Mary Spence nowadays?" she inquired, as she unfolded her napkin, addressing Mrs. Schofield. Penrod abruptly set down his soup spoon and gazed at his aunt with flattering attention.

(To Be Continued.)

Joseph Carpenter, a merchant of East Grange, N. J., collapsed from the heat on a subway train at Brooklyn Bridge. He was removed to Hudson Street Hospital.

A new vote of credit of $750,000,000 was introduced in the British House of Commons. This does not involve a new loan, but provides for expenditures out of funds on hand.

William J. Lee, arrested while trying to insert an advertisement in a New York newspaper, threatening the life of Governor Fielder of New Jersey, was committed to Bellevue for observation.

War munitions in large quantities are piling up at Vladivostok. Shortage of freight cors and engines is holding back the supplies so urgently needed at the front.